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(54) **VERTICAL 4-WAY SHARED PIXEL IN A SINGLE COLUMN WITH INTERNAL RESET AND NO ROW SELECT**

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(57)

ABSTRACT

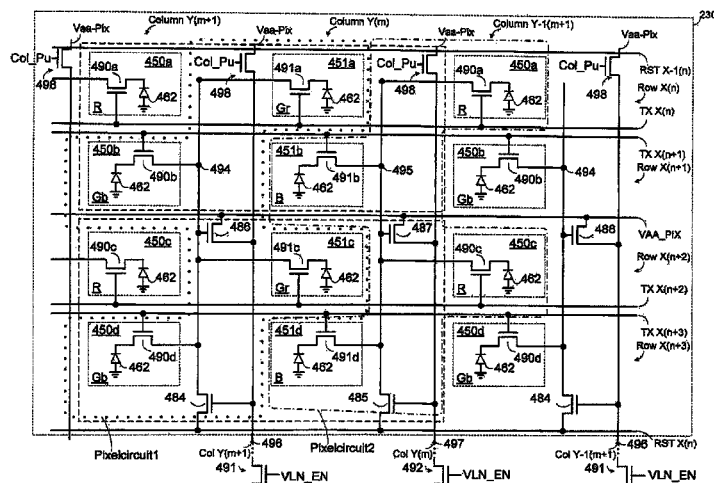
A method and apparatus for reducing space and pixel circuit complexity by using a 4-way shared vertically aligned pixels in a same column. The at least four pixels in the pixel circuit share a reset transistor and a source follower transistor, can have a plurality of same colored pixels and a plurality of colors, but do not include a row select transistor.

(58) **Field of Classification Search**

USPC 348/273, 308, 203.1, 268, 269, 272, 348/294

See application file for complete search history.

17 Claims, 10 Drawing Sheets



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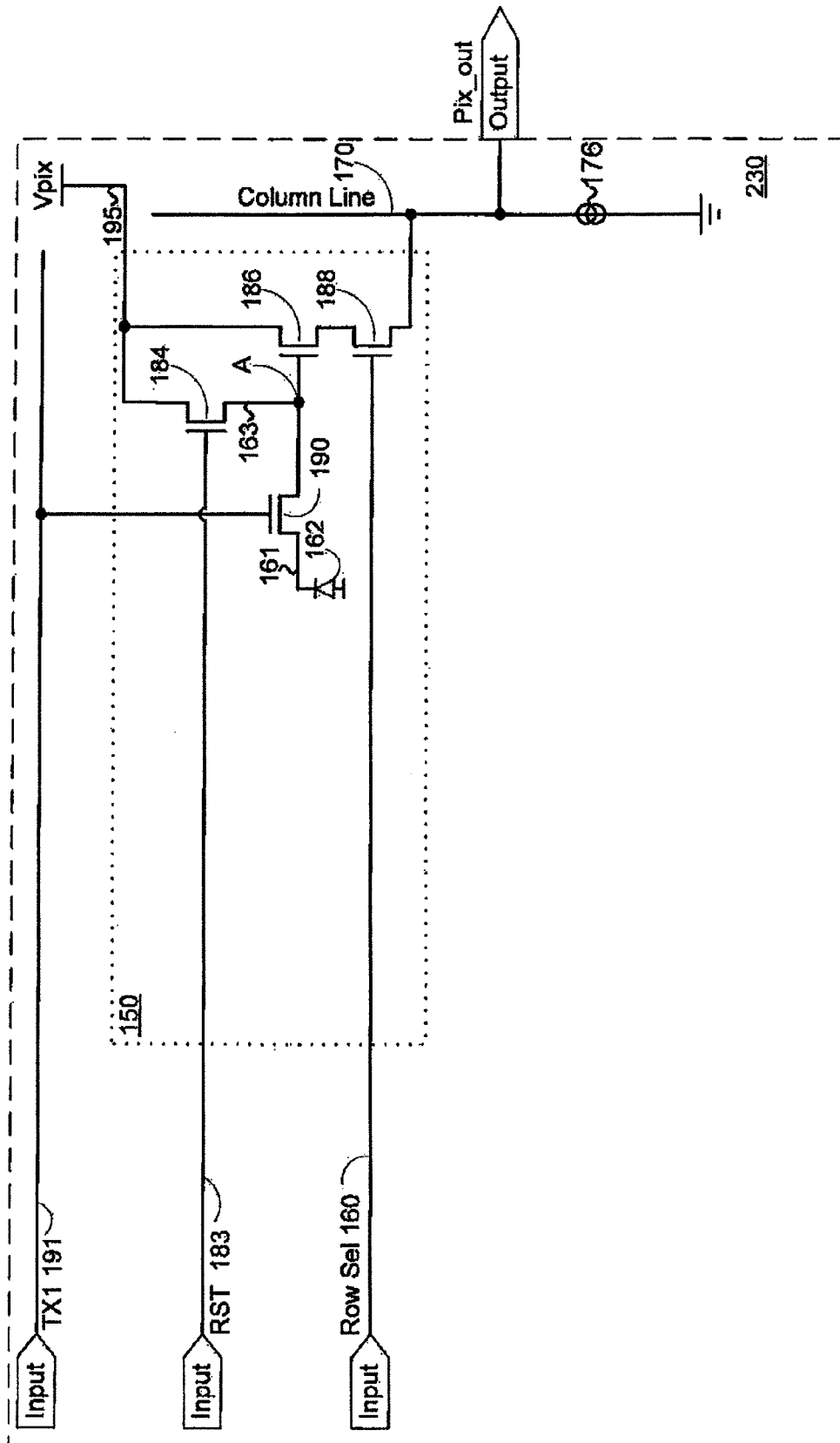


FIG. 1

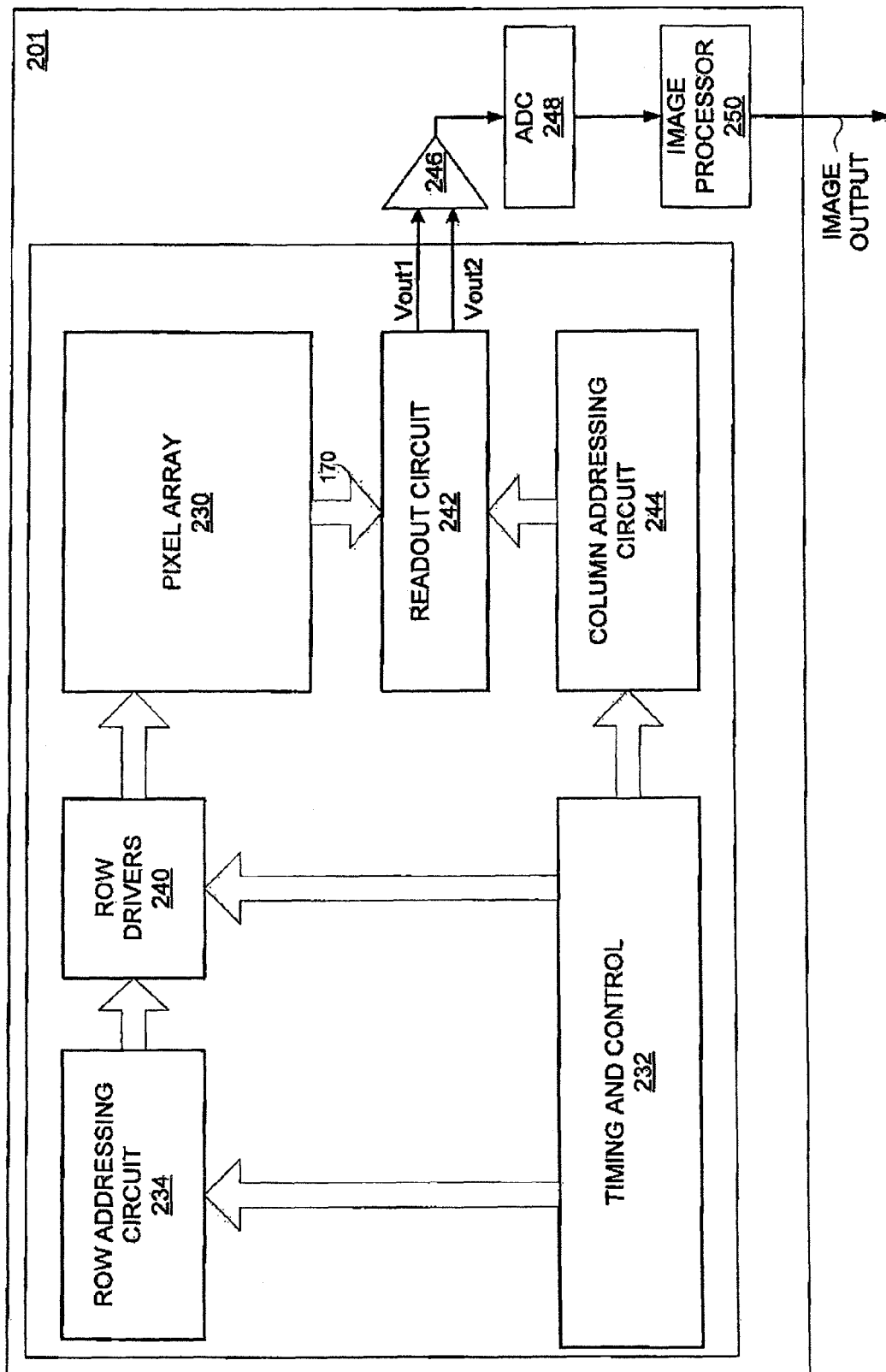


FIG. 2

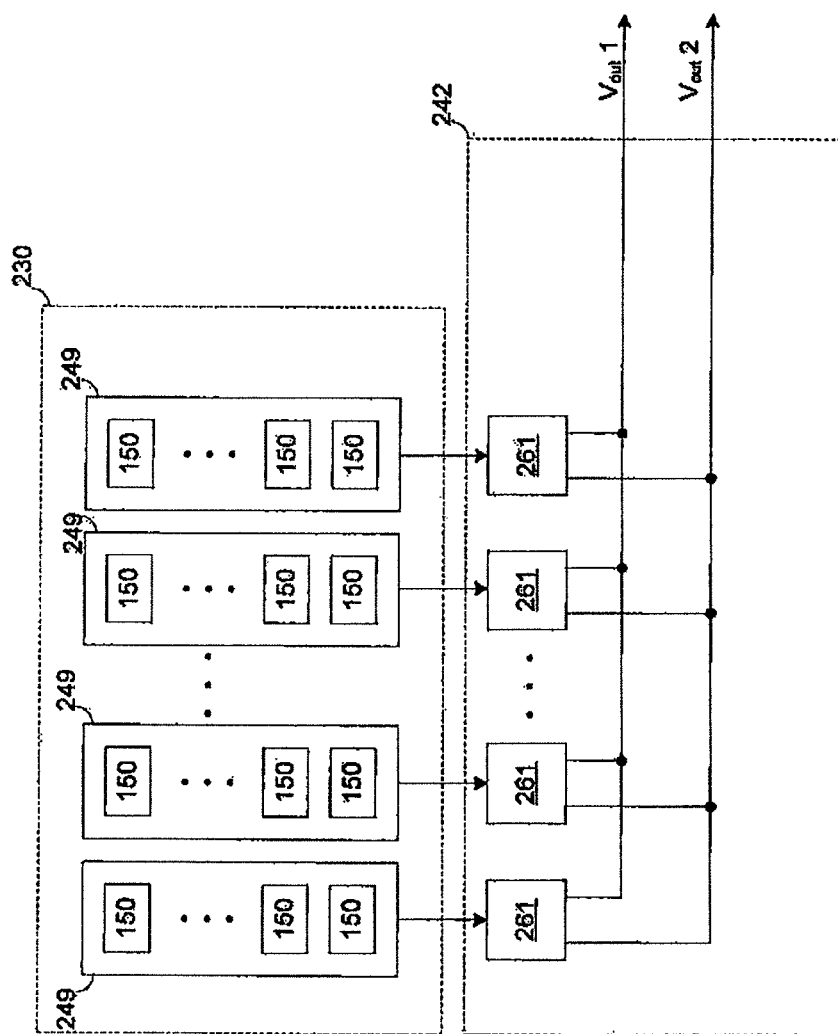


FIG. 3

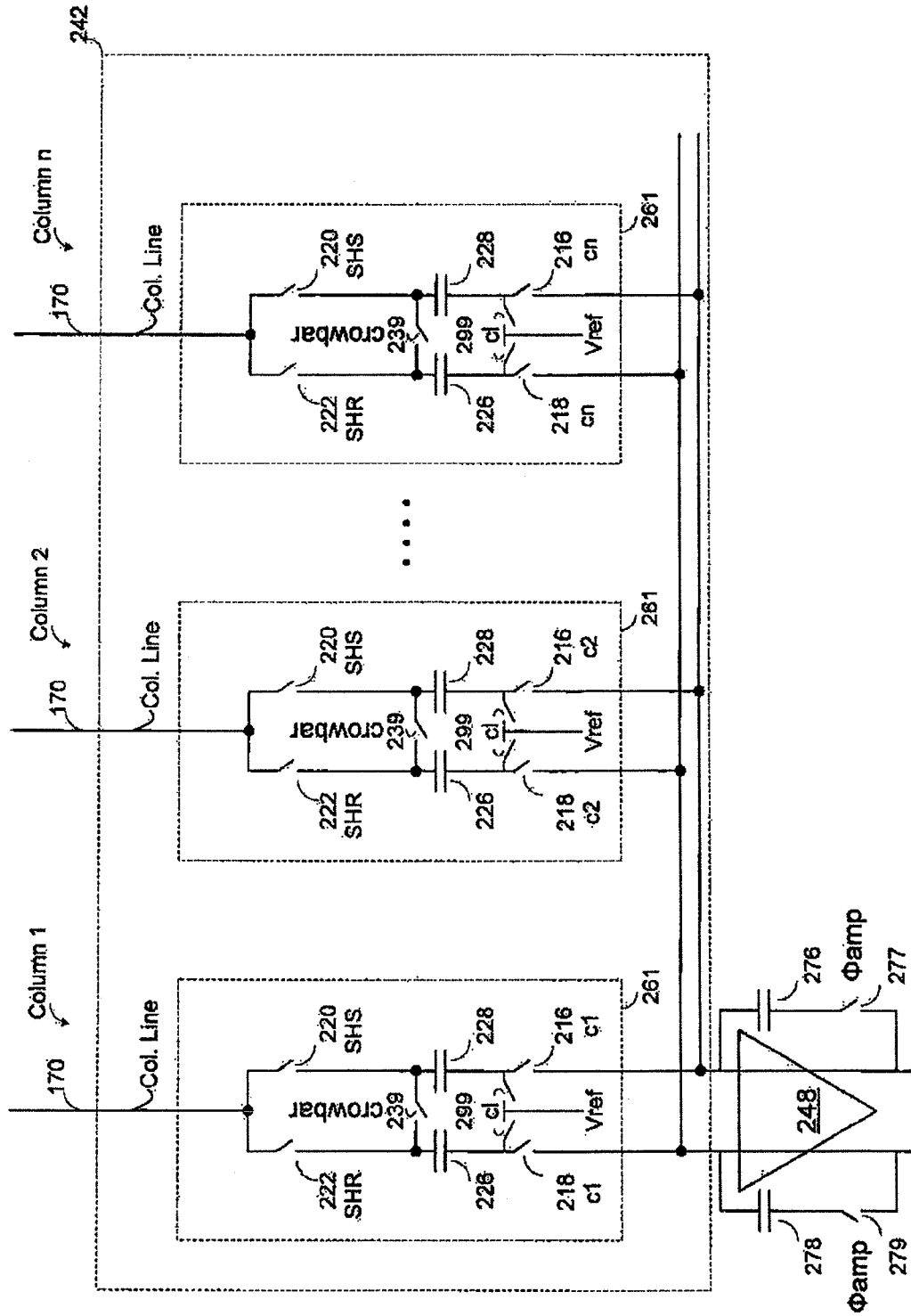


FIG. 4

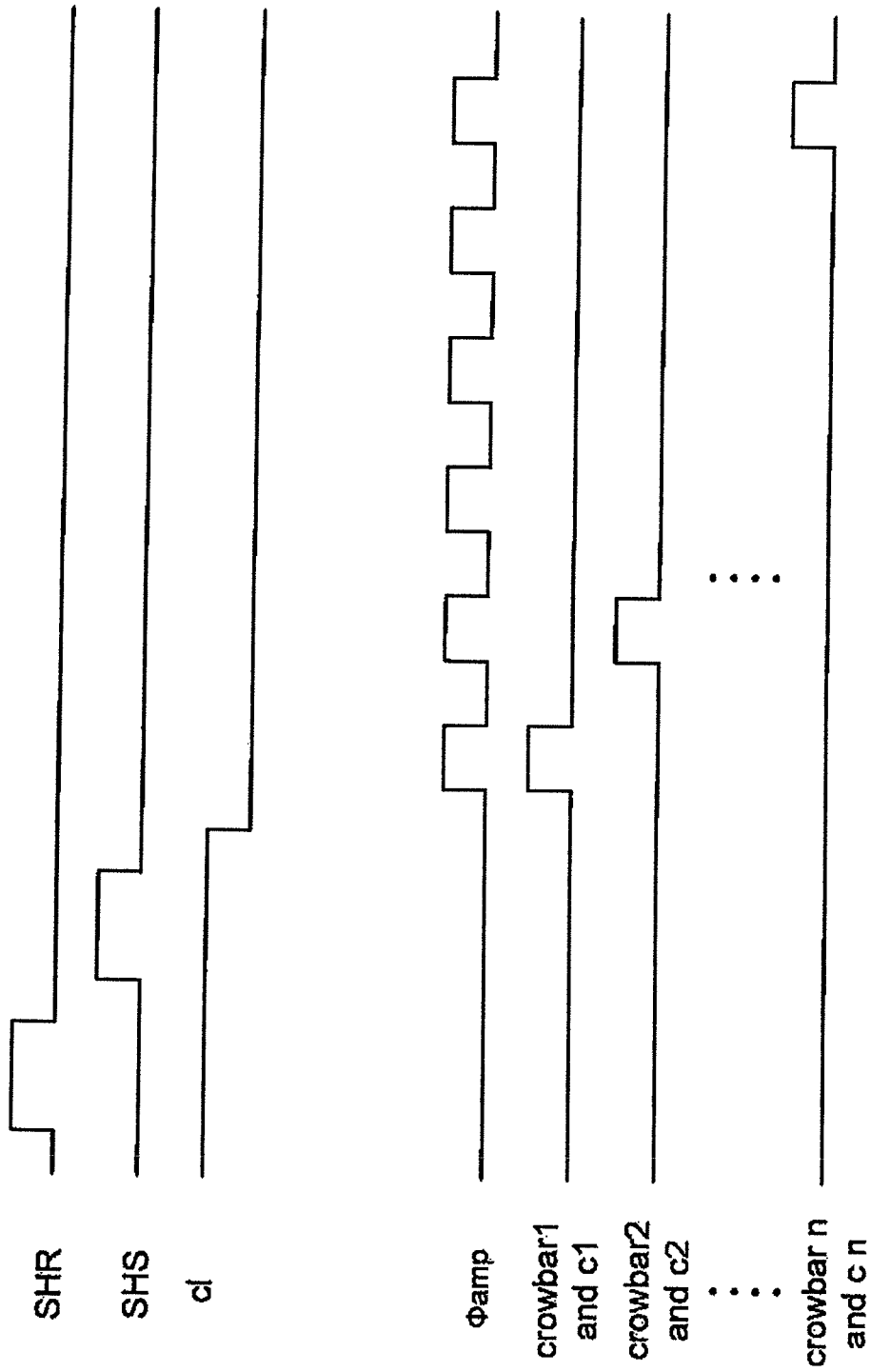


FIG. 5

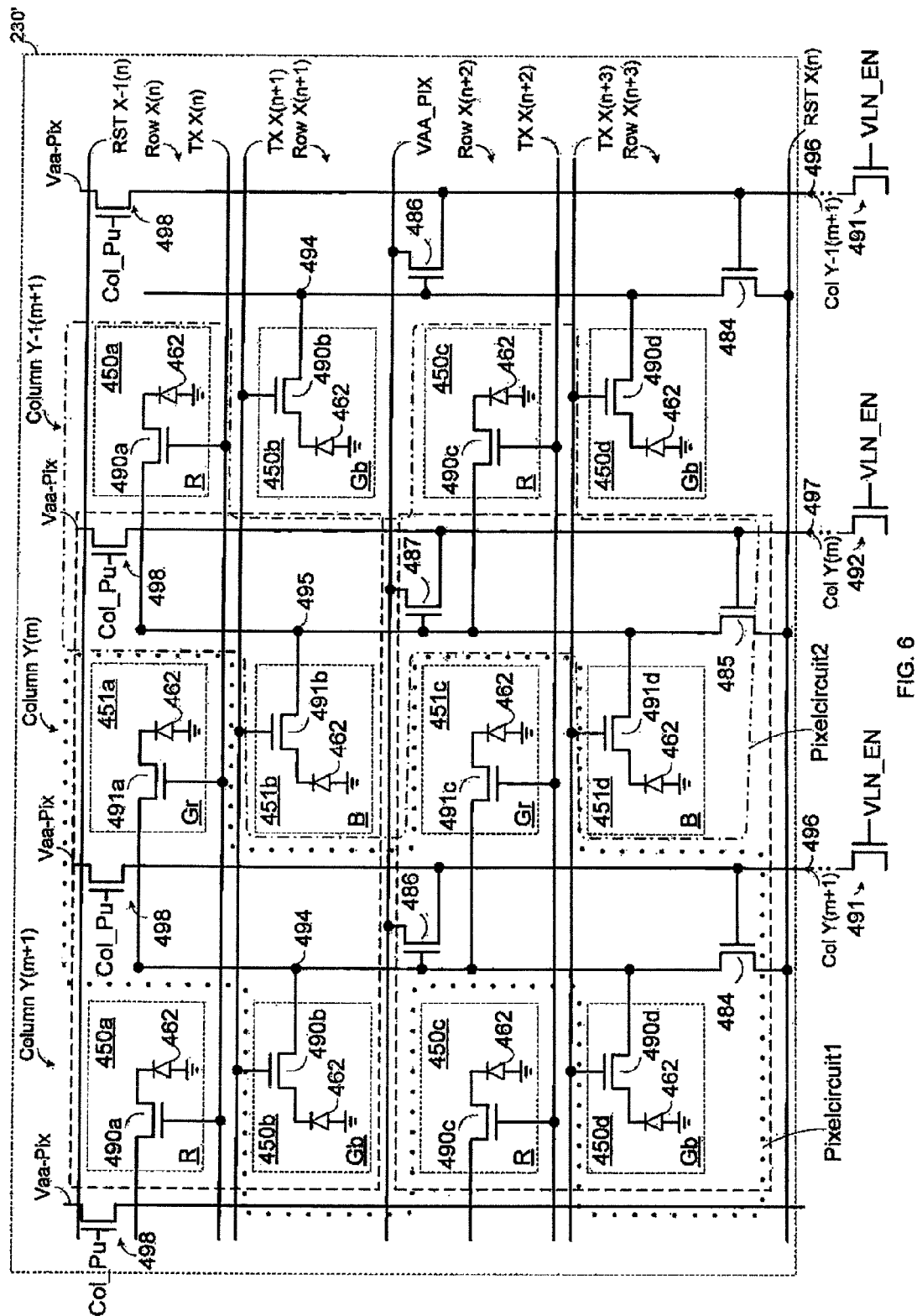


FIG. 6

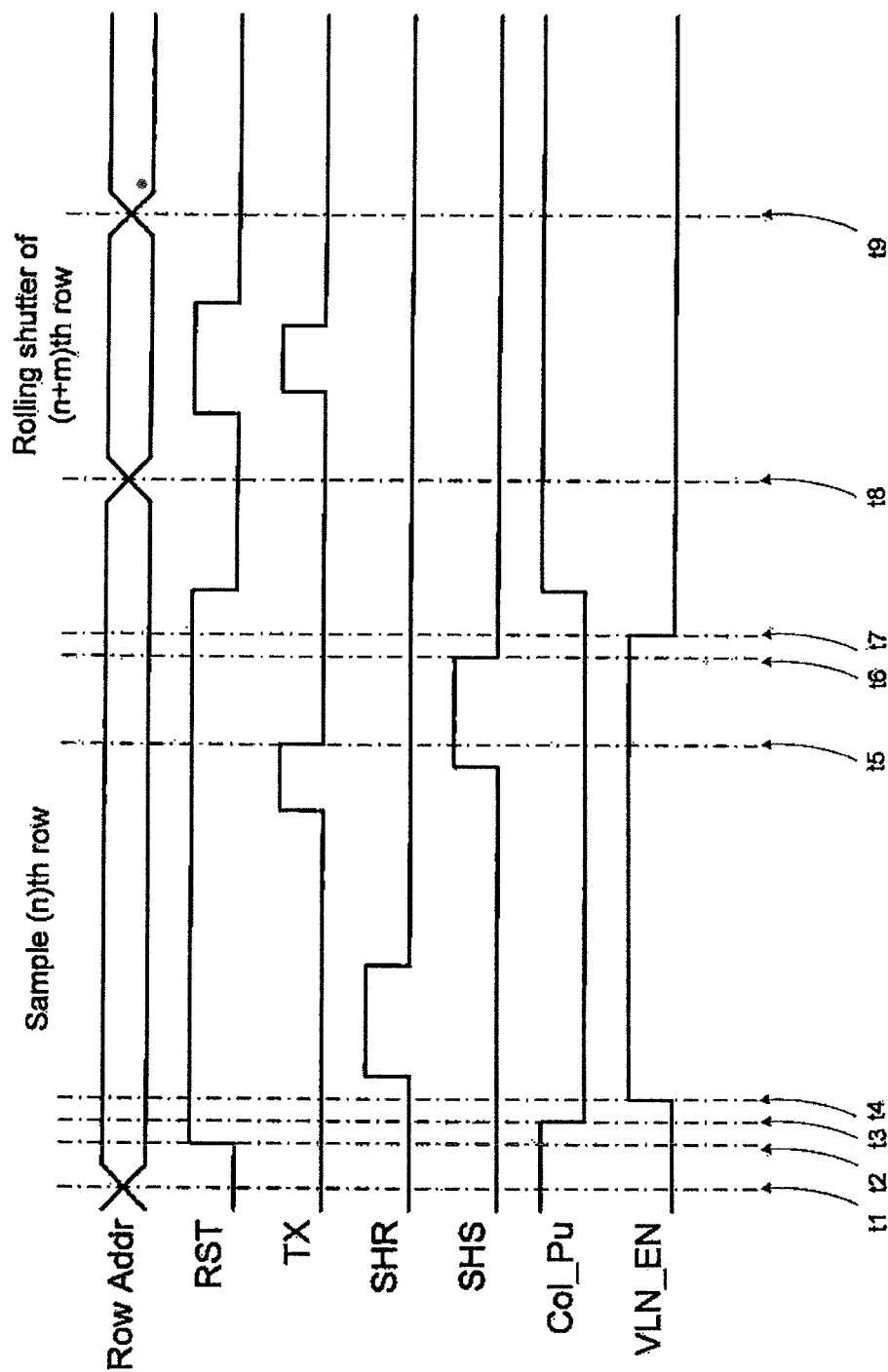


FIG. 7

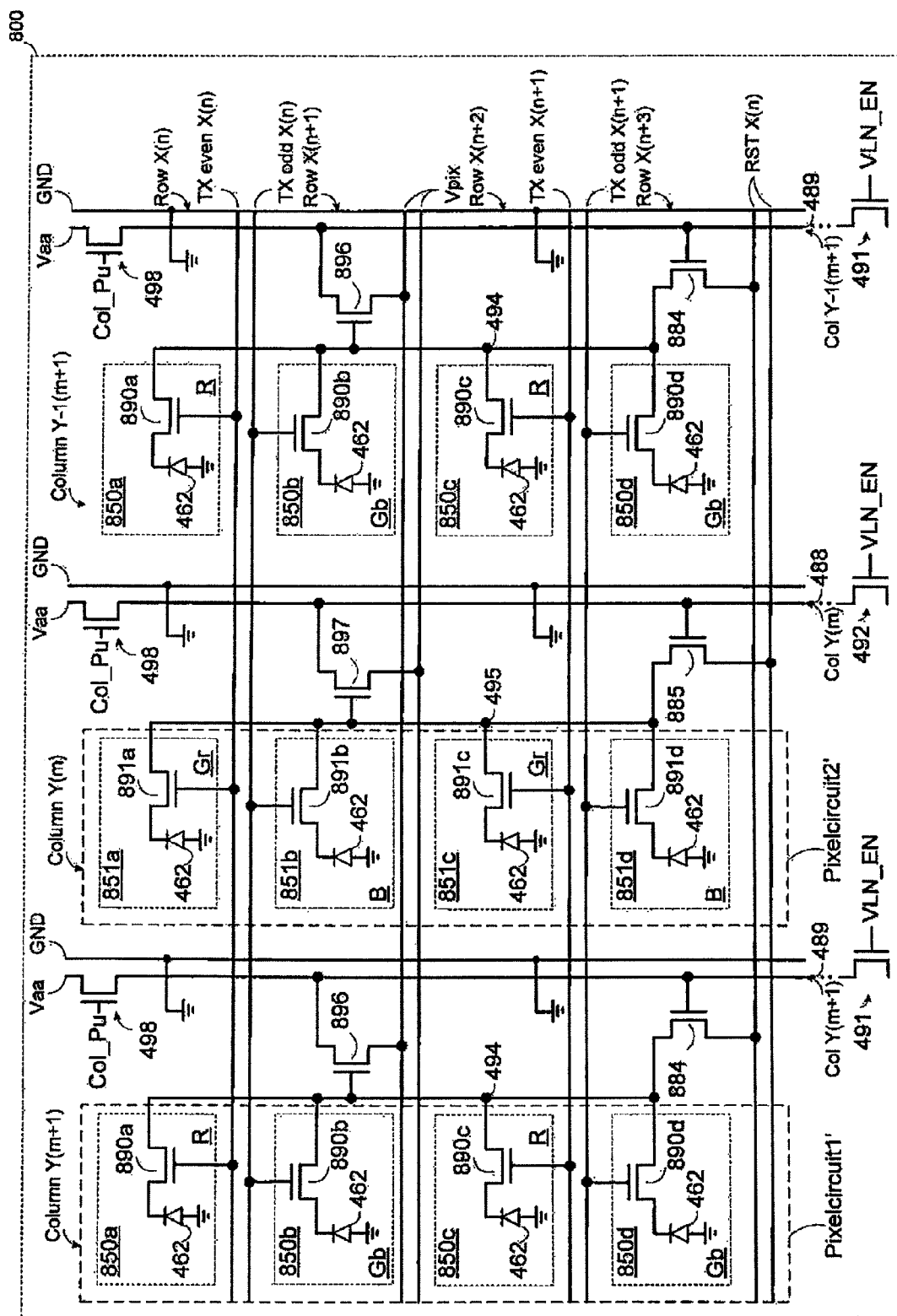


FIG. 8

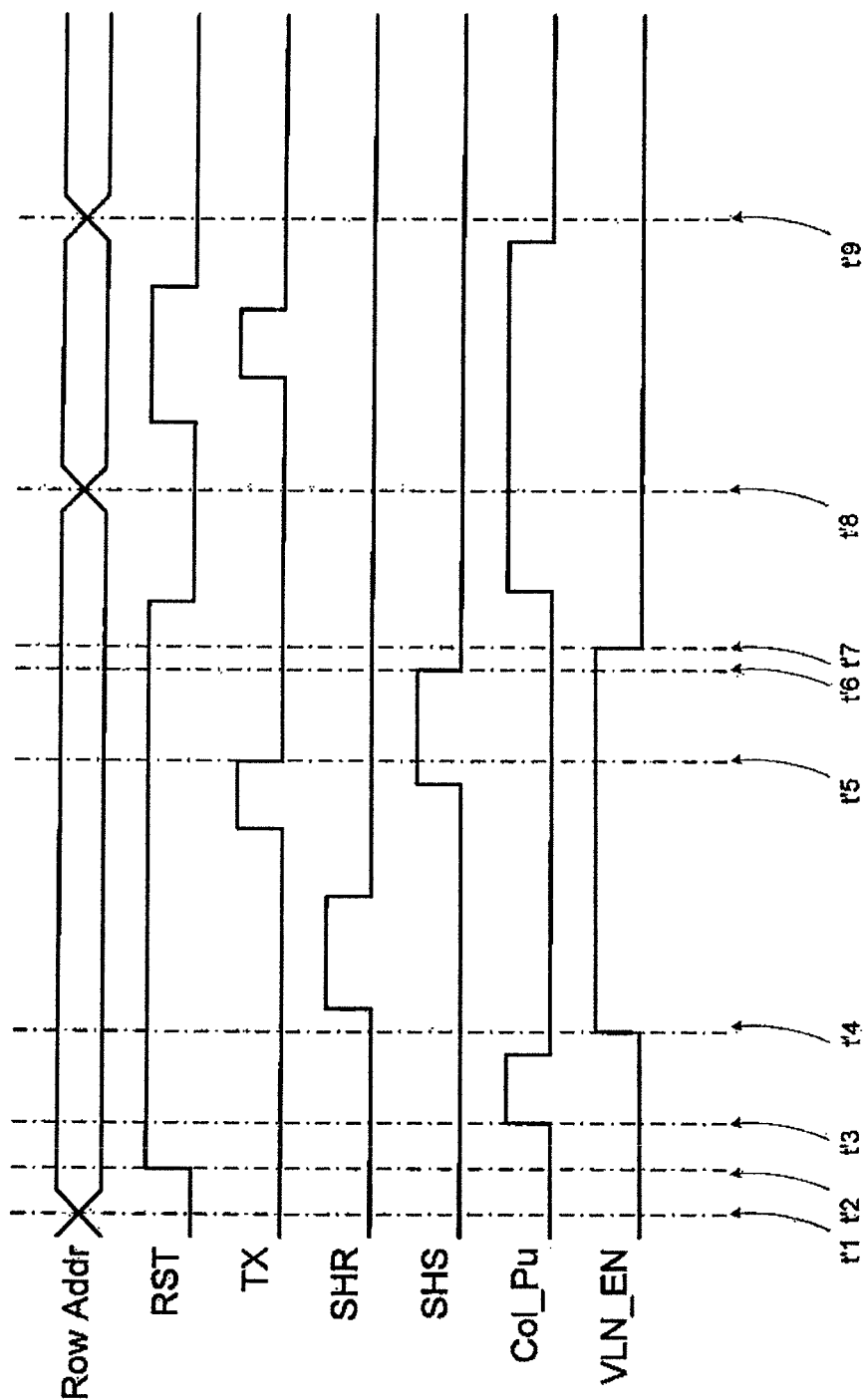


FIG. 9

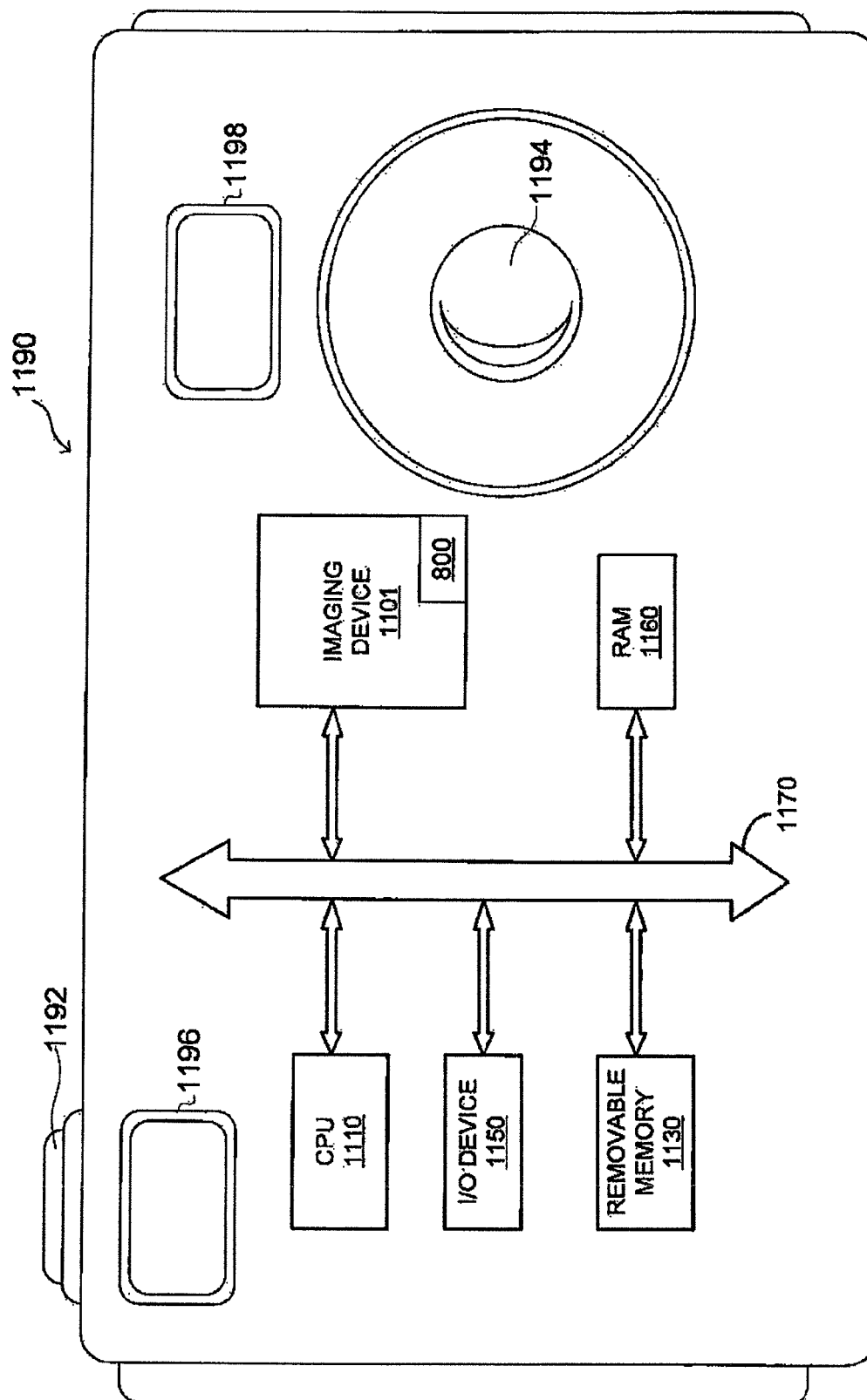


FIG. 10

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VERTICAL 4-WAY SHARED PIXEL IN A SINGLE COLUMN WITH INTERNAL RESET AND NO ROW SELECT

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application is a divisional of application Ser. No. 12/285,308, filed Oct. 1, 2008, the entirety of which is incorporated herein by reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

Embodiments described herein relate generally to improved semiconductor imaging devices and in particular to imaging devices having an array of pixels and to methods of operating the pixels to reduce temporal noise.

2. Background of the Invention

A conventional four transistor (4T) circuit for a pixel **150** in a pixel array **230** of a CMOS imager is illustrated in FIG. 1. The 4T pixel **150** has a photosensor such as a photodiode **162**, a reset transistor **184**, a transfer transistor **190**, a source follower transistor **186**, and a row select transistor **188**. It should be understood that FIG. 1 shows the circuitry for operation of a single pixel **150**, and that in practical use, there will be an M×N array of pixels arranged in rows and columns with the pixels of the array **230** being accessed using row and column select circuitry, as described in more detail below.

The photodiode **162** converts incident photons to electrons, which are selectively passed to a floating diffusion region A through the transfer transistor **190** when activated by a TX1 control signal. The source follower transistor **186** has its gate connected to floating diffusion region A and thus amplifies the signal appearing at the floating diffusion region A. When a particular row containing pixel **150** is selected by an activated row select transistor **188**, the signal amplified by the source follower transistor **186** is passed on a column line **170** to column readout circuitry (**242**, FIGS. 2-4). The photodiode **162** accumulates a photo-generated charge in a doped region of its substrate during a charge integration period. It should be understood that the pixel **150** may include a photogate or other photon to charge converting device, in lieu of a photodiode, as the initial accumulator for photo-generated charge.

The gate of transfer transistor **190** is coupled to a transfer control signal line **191** for receiving the TX1 control signal, thereby serving to control the coupling of the photodiode **162** to region A. A voltage source V_{pix} is selectively coupled through reset transistor **184** and conductive line **163** to floating diffusion region A. The gate of the reset transistor **184** is coupled to a reset control line **183** for receiving a RST control signal to control the reset operation in which the voltage source V_{pix} is connected to floating diffusion region A.

A row select signal (Row Sel) on a row select control line **160** is used to activate the row select transistor **188**. Although not shown, the row select control line **160**, reset control line **183**, and transfer signal control line **191** are coupled to all of the pixels of the same row of the array. The voltage source V_{pix} is coupled to transistors **184** and **186** by conductive line **195**. The column line **170** is coupled to the output of all of the pixels of the same column of the array and typically has a current sink **176** at one end. Signals from the pixel **150** are selectively coupled to a column readout circuit **242** (FIGS. 2-4) through the column line **170**.

As is known in the art, a value can be read from pixel **150** in a two step correlated double sampling process. First, floating diffusion region A is reset by activating the reset transistor

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184. The reset signal (e.g., V_{rst}) found at floating diffusion region A is readout to column line **170** via the source follower transistor **186** and the activated row select transistor **188**. During a charge integration period, photodiode **162** produces charge from incident light. This is also known as the image integration period. After the integration period, the transfer transistor **190** is activated and the charge from the photodiode **162** is passed through the transfer transistor **190** to floating diffusion region A, where the charge is amplified by the source follower transistor **186** and passed to the column line **170** (through the row select transistor **188**) as an integrated charge signal V_{sig}. In some instances, the reset signal V_{rst} is provided after the integrated charge signal V_{sig}. As a result, two different voltage signals—the reset signal V_{rst} and the integrated charge signal V_{sig}—are readout from the pixel **150** onto the column line **170** and to column readout circuitry **242**, where each signal is sampled and held for further processing as is known in the art. Typically, all pixels in a row are readout simultaneously onto respective column lines **170** and the column lines may be activated in sequence or in parallel for pixel reset and signal voltage readout.

FIG. 2 shows an example CMOS imager device **201** that includes the pixel array **230** and a timing and control circuit **232**, which provides timing and control signals to enable reading out of signals stored in the pixels in a manner commonly known to those skilled in the art. Example arrays have dimensions of M×N pixels, with the size of the array **230** depending on a particular application. In the illustrated imager device **201**, the pixel signals from the array **230** are readout a row at a time using a column parallel readout architecture. The controller **232** selects a particular row of pixels in the array **230** by controlling the operation of row addressing circuit **234** and row drivers **240**. Reset V_{rst} and image V_{sig} signals in the selected row of pixels are provided on the column lines **170** to a column readout circuit **242** in the manner described above. The signals read from each of the columns can be readout sequentially or in parallel using a column addressing circuit **244**. Pixel signals (V_{rst}, V_{sig}) corresponding to the readout reset signal and integrated charge signal are provided as respective outputs V_{out1}, V_{out2} of the column readout circuit **242** where they are subtracted in differential amplifier **246**, digitized by analog-to-digital converter (ADC) **248**, and sent to an image processor circuit **250** for image processing.

FIG. 3 shows more details of one example of the arrangement of the rows and columns **249** of pixels **150** in the array **230**. Each column **249** includes multiple rows of pixels **150**. Signals from the pixels **150** in a particular column **249** can be readout to sample and hold circuitry **261** associated with the column **249** (part of circuit **242**) for acquiring the pixel reset V_{rst} and integrated charge V_{sig} signals. Signals stored in the sample and hold circuits **261** can be read sequentially column-by-column to the differential amplifier **246** (FIG. 2), which subtracts the reset and integrated charge signals and sends them to the analog-to-digital converter **248** (FIG. 2). Alternatively, a plurality of analog-to-digital converters **248** may also be provided, each digitizing sampled and held signals from one or more columns **249**.

FIG. 4 illustrates portions of three sample and hold circuits **261** of FIG. 3 in greater detail. Each sample and hold circuit **261** holds a set of signals, e.g., a reset signal V_{rst} and an integrated charge signal V_{sig} from a desired pixel. For example, a reset signal V_{rst} of a desired pixel connected to column line **170** is stored on capacitor **226** and the integrated charge signal V_{sig} from column line **170** is stored on capacitor **228**. A front side of capacitor **226** is switchably coupled to the column line **170** through switch **222** and a backside of

capacitor 226 is switchably coupled to amplifier 248 through switch 218. A front side of capacitor 228 is switchably coupled to the column line 170 through switch 220 and a backside of capacitor 228 is switchably coupled to amplifier 248 through switch 216. The front side of capacitor 226 is switchably coupled to the front side of capacitor 228 through crowbar switch 239. The backside of capacitor 226 is switchably coupled to the backside of capacitor 228 and to a reference voltage V_{ref} source through clamp switch 299.

Each sample and hold circuit 261 is coupled to amplifier 248 having first and second inputs. The first input of amplifier 248 is coupled to a first output of amplifier 248 through a capacitor 278 and a switch 279 to provide a first feedback circuit. The second input of amplifier 248 is coupled to a second output of amplifier 248 through a capacitor 276 and a switch 277 to provide a second feedback circuit.

The CMOS imager of FIGS. 1-4 has identical correlated double sampling and holding timing for all columns over an entire row. Thus, all of the pixels in a row are readout at substantially the same time. The simplified correlated double sampling and column read out timing is depicted in FIG. 5.

Thus, to begin a readout operation, a logic high clamp signal $c1$ is provided to clamp switch 299 thereby coupling the backsides of capacitors 226, 228 to a reference voltage source V_{ref} . When a reset signal V_{rst} is read from the pixel 150, a logic high SHR signal is provided to the gate of switch 222 thereby coupling the front side of capacitor 226 to the column line 170. When the readout of the reset signal V_{rst} from the pixel 150 is complete, a logic low SHR signal is provided to the gate of switch 222 thereby uncoupling the front side of capacitor 226 from the column line 170. Thus, a reset signal V_{rst} has been sampled and stored on capacitor 226.

After the reset V_{rst} signal is read from pixel 150, an integrated charge signal V_{sig} is readout. When the integrated charge signal V_{sig} is read from pixel 150, a logic high SHS signal is provided to the gate of switch 220 thereby coupling the front side of capacitor 228 to the column line 170. When the readout of the integrated charge signal V_{sig} from the pixel 150 is complete, a logic low SHS signal is provided to the gate of switch 220 thereby uncoupling the front side of capacitor 228 from the column line 170. Thus, an integrated charge signal V_{sig} has been sampled and stored on capacitor 228.

When the readout operation is complete, a logic low clamp signal $c1$ is provided to clamp switch 299 thereby uncoupling the backsides of capacitors 226, 228 from the reference voltage source V_{ref} .

After a row of pixels has been readout, sampled, and held, then, generally in column order, the sample and hold circuits 261 output their stored signals to the amplifier 248. When reading from a first sample and hold circuit 261, a logic high control signal Φ_{amp} is provided to the feedback circuits to close switch 279 to couple the first output of amplifier 248 through capacitor 278 to its first input and to close switch 277 to couple the second output of amplifier 248 through capacitor 276 to its second input. A logic high crowbar control signal, e.g., $crowbar1$ for the sample and hold circuit 261 associated with the first column, is also provided to the sample and hold circuit 261 being readout to close the associated crowbar switch 239, thereby coupling the front side of capacitor 226 to the front side of capacitor 228. A logic high control signal, e.g., $c1$ for the sample and hold circuit 261 associated with the first column, is also provided to the sample and hold circuit 261 being readout to close switch 218 and switch 216, thereby coupling the backside of capacitor 226 to the first input of amplifier 248 and coupling the backside of capacitor 228 to the second input of amplifier 248.

After the reset and integrated charge signals have been readout to amplifier 248, a logic low control signal Φ_{amp} is provided to the feedback circuits to open switch 279 and uncouple the first output of amplifier 248 from capacitor 278 and to open switch 277 and uncouple the second output of amplifier 248 from capacitor 276. A logic low crowbar control signal (e.g., $crowbar1$ for the first column) is provided to the sample and hold 261 being readout to open the associated crowbar switch 239, thereby uncoupling the front side of capacitor 226 from the front side of capacitor 228. A logic low control signal e.g., $c1$, is also provided to the sample and hold 261 being readout to open switch 218 and switch 216, thereby uncoupling the backside of capacitor 226 from the first input of amplifier 248 and uncoupling the backside of capacitor 228 from the second input of amplifier 248. Thus, a correlated double sampled signal is provided as output from amplifier 248 resulting from the input of the integrated charge and reset signals to the amplifier 248. After a row of sample and hold circuits 261 have been readout, a next of row of pixels 150 in the pixel array 230 are sample, held, and then readout through the amplifier 248.

FIG. 6 illustrates a modified pixel array 230' that uses 4-way shared pixel circuitry comprising four pixels in neighboring columns and which desirably omits a row select transistor in the readout circuit for the shared pixel circuits. The pixel array 230' is an alternative to the pixel array 230. The pixel array 230' is comprised of even columns that include pixels 450a-d and odd columns that include pixels 451a-d. Although pixel array 230' is depicted as including three columns and four rows, the pixel array 230' is representative of a pixel array having any plurality of rows and columns. The columns of the pixel array 230' are labeled $Y(m+1)$, $Y(m)$, and $Y-1(m+1)$ and the rows of pixel array 230' are labeled $X(n)$, $X(n+1)$, $X(n+2)$, and $X(n+3)$.

In array 230' pixels are diagonally grouped by color into a pixel circuit; thus, green pixels are grouped together and blue and red pixels are grouped together. A green pixel circuit, for example PixelCircuit1, is comprised of pixels 451a, 450b, 451c, and 450d. The green pixel circuit PixelCircuit1 also includes a reset transistor 484 and a source follower transistor 486. A blue and red pixel circuit, for example PixelCircuit2, is comprised of pixels 450a, 451b, 450c, and 451d. The blue and red pixel circuit PixelCircuit2 also includes a reset transistor 485 and a source follower transistor 487. In operation, the green pixel circuit PixelCircuit1 is readout, row by row, through a single column line, e.g., Col $Y(m+1)$ and the blue and red pixel circuit PixelCircuit2 is readout, row by row, through a single column line, e.g., Col $Y(m)$. No row select transistors are used in the readout circuit to couple the source follower transistors 486, 487 to a column line.

Pixel array 230' also includes transfer transistor control lines associated with each row of the array 230', e.g., TX $X(n)$ for pixels in row $X(n)$ associated with transfer transistors 490a and 491a. Additionally, pixel array 230' includes reset transistor control lines associated with each group of four rows of the array, e.g., RST $X(n)$ for pixels in rows $X(n)$, $X(n+1)$, $X(n+2)$, and $X(n+3)$, associated with reset transistors 484, 485. Moreover, pixel array 230' includes column pull up (Col_Pu) transistors 498 to control coupling a V_{aa-pix} voltage to a column line 496, 497.

FIG. 7 depicts a simplified correlated double sampling and column read out timing for the pixel array 230' of FIG. 6. To begin a readout operation of a row $X(n)$, at a time $t1$, a row address $X(n)$ is provided to row addressing circuit 234 and column addressing circuit 244 of FIG. 2. A Col_Pu signal is applied to transistors 498 to couple lines 496, 497 to a voltage (e.g., V_{aa-pix} signal level) and therefore to activate the reset

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transistors **484**, **485**. At time **t2**, a logic high RST signal is provided to the reset line RST X(n), thereby placing a reset charge on one of a source or drain of reset transistors **484**, **485**. The floating diffusion regions **494**, **495** are reset by this operation. At time **t3**, a logic low Col_Pu signal is applied to transistors **498** to turn off transistors **498** and to deactivate reset transistors **484**, **485**, no longer resetting diffusion regions **494**, **495**. Time **t3** occurs approximately 250-750 ns after time **t2** occurs, preferably 500 ns.

At time **t4**, a logic high VLN_EN control signal is provided to the gates of column line transistors **491**, **492**, thereby creating a pull down circuit on the associated column lines, e.g., **496**, **497**. Time **t4** occurs 50-100 ns after time **t3**, preferably 70 ns. After time **t4**, a logic high SHR signal is strobed to sample and hold a reset signal Vrst readout of the floating diffusion regions **494**, **495** into sample and hold circuitry. The SHR strobe lasts approximately 1-2 μ s, preferably 1.5 μ s. A logic high TX(n) then is strobed, which closes transfer transistors **491a**, **490a** and couples the photodiodes **462** to their associated floating diffusion regions **494**, **495**, thereby transferring the accumulated charge from the photodiode **462** to their associated floating diffusion regions **494**, **495**. The TX strobe lasts approximately 500-1000 ns, preferably 750 ns, ending at time **t5**. A logic high SHS signal is strobed to sample and hold accumulated charge read from the floating diffusion regions **494**, **495** into sample and hold circuitry. The SHS signal begins to be strobed before the TX strobe has completed, e.g., before time **t5**. The strobe of the SHS signal lasts approximately 1-2 μ s, preferably 1.5 μ s and ends at time **t6**. At time **t7**, a logic low VLN_EN signal is provided thereby no longer creating a pulldown circuit on the associated column line. Time **t7** occurs approximately 50-100 ns, preferably, 70 ns, after time **t6**, e.g., the completion of the SHS strobe. Subsequently, a logic high Col_Pu signal and a logic low RST(n) signal are provided. Thus, a reset signal and a charge accumulation signal are sampled from the pixel array **230'**.

At **t8**, a rolling shutter operation occurs. A row address X(n+m) is provided to row addressing circuit **234** and column addressing circuit **244** of FIG. 2, which is used for a rolling shutter. After time **t8**, a logic high RST(n+m) signal and a logic high TX(n+m) are provided. The strobe of the TX(n+m) signal occurs while the RST(n+m) is provided with a logic high signal. After the rolling shutter operation ends, e.g., at time **t9**, the next row of the pixel array is sampled, e.g., row n+1. The pixel array continues to be readout, row by row, until substantially all of the rows of the pixel array have been readout. Thus, a reset signal and a charge accumulated signal are read out from the pixel array. Further, a rolling shutter has been toggled.

With the pixel array **230'** (FIG. 6) PixelCircuit1, PixelCircuit2, are comprised of zigzagged pixels in two neighboring columns, so the pixel circuits are asymmetric and are difficult to significantly reduce in size.

It is desirable to have a shared pixel circuit that is more compact and of reduced size.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a schematic diagram of a conventional imager pixel.

FIG. 2 is a block diagram of a conventional imager device. FIG. 3 is a block diagram of a portion of an array of pixels illustrated in FIG. 2 and an associated column readout circuit.

FIG. 4 is a conventional sample and hold circuit.

FIG. 5 is a simplified timing diagram associated with operation of the circuitry of FIGS. 1-4.

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FIG. 6 is a block diagram of a diagonally shared pixel circuit.

FIG. 7 is a simplified timing diagram associated with operation of the circuitry of FIG. 6.

FIG. 8 is a block diagram of a vertically shared pixel circuit in accordance with an example embodiment disclosed herein.

FIG. 9 is simplified timing diagram associated with operation of the circuitry of FIG. 8.

FIG. 10 is a block diagram representation of a processor-based camera system incorporating a CMOS imaging device in accordance with an embodiment disclosed herein.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

In the following detailed description, reference is made to the accompanying drawings, which form a part hereof, and in which is shown by way of illustration specific embodiments that may be practiced. These embodiments are described in sufficient detail to enable those of ordinary skill in the art to make and use them, and it is to be understood that structural, logical, or procedural changes may be made.

Embodiments described herein provide a shared pixel circuit which omits a row select transistor in the readout circuit of a shared pixel and which reduces the size and complexity required by the shared pixel array depicted in FIG. 6. By providing a vertically shared (i.e., within the same column) pixel circuit, the overall size of the pixel array can be reduced. With a pixel circuit being shared vertically instead of across columns, associated readout circuitry is less complex. Thus, pixel circuits are symmetrical and can be reduced in size. Furthermore, the pixel circuits can also be readout quicker than the pixel circuit of FIG. 6.

FIG. 8 illustrates a pixel array **800** comprising vertically 4-way shared pixel circuitry, each comprising four pixels in a same column in accordance with an example embodiment. The pixel array **800** is comprised of even columns that include pixels **850a-d** and odd columns that include pixels **851a-d**. Although pixel array **800** is depicted as including three columns and four rows, the pixel array **800** is representative of a pixel array having any plurality of rows and columns. The columns of the pixel array **800** are labeled Y(m+1), Y(m), and Y-1(m+1) and the rows of pixel array **800** are labeled X(n), X(n+1), X(n+2), and X(n+3).

In illustrated embodiment, pixels are vertically grouped by column into a shared pixel circuit; thus, four pixels in a column are grouped together. A first shared pixel circuit, for example PixelCircuit1', is comprised of pixels **850a**, **850b**, **850c**, and **850d**. The first pixel circuit PixelCircuit1' also includes a reset transistor **884** and a source follower transistor **896**. PixelCircuit1' does not include a row select transistor. A second shared pixel circuit, for example PixelCircuit2', is comprised of pixels **851a**, **851b**, **851c**, and **851d**. The second pixel circuit PixelCircuit2' also includes a reset transistor **885** and a source follower transistor **897** and does not include a row select transistor.

Each shared pixel circuit, e.g., PixelCircuit1' has a plurality of pixels, and at least two of the plurality of pixels are of a same color. For example, as depicted in FIG. 8, PixelCircuit1' includes two green pixels **850b**, **850d**. Additionally, PixelCircuit1' includes two pixels of a second same color, e.g., pixels **850a**, **850c** are red. Similarly, PixelCircuit2' includes two green pixels **851a**, **851c** and two blue pixels **851b**, **851d**. All of the plurality of pixels of the shared pixel circuit are in a same column of pixels. For example, the pixels of PixelCircuit1' are all in column Y(m+1). Each column of pixels in array **230'** includes a plurality of pixel circuits.

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In an aspect, the pixel array **800** includes a plurality of ground (GND) lines that run in a vertical direction of the array. These ground lines are connected throughout the array **800** at various locations to a ground source. Including a plurality of GND lines that are relatively locally connected to a ground source reduces noise. Pixel array **800** includes column pull up (Col_Pu) transistors **498** to control coupling a Vaa-pix voltage to a column line **488**, **489**.

FIG. 9 depicts a simplified correlated double sampling and column read out timing for the pixel array **800** of FIG. 8. To begin a readout operation of a row X(n), at a time t'1, a row address X(n) is provided to row addressing circuit **234** and column addressing circuit **244** FIG. 2. At time t'2, a logic high RST signal is provided to the reset line RST X(n), thereby placing a charge on one of a source or drain of reset transistors **884**, **885**. The floating diffusion regions **494**, **495** are reset. At time t'3, a logic high Col_PU signal is provided to transistors **498** thereby coupling the lines **488**, **489** to a voltage, e.g., Vaa_pix voltage level and enabling diffusion regions **494**, **495** to be reset (via the reset transistors **884**, **885**). In an aspect, time t'3 occurs approximately 250-750 ns after time t'2 occurs, preferably 500 ns. Before time t'4 occurs, a logic low Col_Pu signal is provided to transistors **498** thereby uncoupling the lines **488**, **489** from the voltage, e.g., Vaa_pix voltage level, and disabling diffusion regions **494**, **495** from being further reset.

At time t'4, a logic high VLN_EN control signal is provided to the gates of transistors **491**, **492** thereby creating a pull down circuit on the associated column lines, e.g., **488**, **489**. In one aspect, time t'4 occurs approximately 50-100 ns after time t'3, preferably 70 ns. After time t'4, a logic high SHR signal is strobed to sample and hold a reset signal read from the floating diffusion regions **494**, **495** into a sample and hold circuit. In an aspect, the SHR strobe lasts approximately 1-2 μ s, preferably 1.5 μ s. A logic high TX(n) is strobed which closes transfer transistors **891a**, **890a** and couples the photodiodes **462** to their associated floating diffusion regions **494**, **495** transferring the accumulated charge from the photodiodes **462** to their associated floating diffusion regions **494**, **495**. In an aspect the TX(n) strobe lasts approximately 50-100 ns, preferably 70 ns, and ends at time t'5. A logic high SHS signal is strobed to sample and hold the accumulated charge read from the floating diffusion regions **494**, **495** into a sample and hold circuit. In a preferred approach, the SHS signal begins to be strobed before time t'5, e.g., before the TX(n) strobe has completed. In an aspect, the strobe of the SHS signal lasts approximately 1-2 μ s, preferably 1.5 μ s, and ends at time t'6. At time t'7, a logic low VLN_EN is provided thereby no longer creating a pulldown circuit on the associated column line. In an aspect time t'7 occurs approximately 50-100 ns, preferably, 70 ns, after the completion of the SHS strobe. Subsequently, a logic low RST(n) signal is provided. Thus, a reset signal and a charge accumulation signal are sampled from the pixel array. After that, the Col_Pu is enabled with RST(n) at low to reset the floating diffusion regions **494**, **495** to a low potential, which turns off the source follower transistor on the nth row.

At time t'8, a rolling shutter operation begins. A row address X(n+m) is provided to row addressing circuit **234** and column addressing circuit **244** (FIG. 2), which is used to implement a rolling shutter. After time t'8, the logic high RST(n+m) signal and a logic high TX(n+m) are provided to reset the floating diffusion regions **494**, **495** and photodiodes **462** to a high potential and fully deplete the photodiodes **462**. In an aspect, the strobe of the TX(n+m) signal occurs while the RST(n+m) is provided with a logic high signal; the Col_Pu is high and keeps the RST(n+m) at low to turn off the

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source follower on the (n+m)th row. After an initial aspect of the rolling shutter operation ends at time t'9, the next row of the pixel array is sampled, e.g., row n+1. As conventionally known, the pixel array continues to be readout, row by row, until substantially all of the rows of the pixel array have been readout.

FIG. 10 is a block diagram representation of processor system that may include imaging device **1101** having the pixel array **800** (FIG. 8) and associated readout circuitry as described with respect to the various embodiments described herein. The processor system could, for example, be a camera system **1190**. A camera system **1190** generally comprises a shutter release button **1192**, a view finder **1196**, a flash **1198** and a lens system **1194** for focusing an image on the pixel array **800** of imaging device **1101**. A camera system **1190** generally also comprises a central processing unit (CPU) **1110**, for example, a microprocessor for controlling camera functions which communicates with one or more input/output devices (I/O) **1150** over a bus **1170**. The CPU **1110** also exchanges data with random access memory (RAM) **1160** over bus **1170**, typically through a memory controller. The camera system **1190** may also include peripheral devices such as a removable memory **1130**, which also communicates with CPU **1110** over the bus **1170**. Imager device **1101** is coupled to the processor system and includes a pixel array **800** as described along with respect to FIGS. 8-9. Other processor systems which may employ imaging devices **800** besides cameras, including computers, PDAs, cellular telephones, scanners, machine vision systems, and other systems requiring an imager operation.

While the embodiments have been described and illustrated with reference to specific example embodiments, it should be understood that many modifications and substitutions can be made. Although the embodiments discussed above describe specific numbers of transistors, photodiodes, conductive lines, etc., they are not so limited. For example, the above embodiments are not limited to vertical (single column) with internal reset and no row select of a 4 way shared pixel and could be applied to 2 way shared, 3 way shared, 5 way shared, etc. Accordingly, the claimed invention is not to be considered as limited by the foregoing description but is only limited by the scope of the claims.

What is claimed as new and desired to be protected by Letters Patent of the United States is:

1. A method of reading from a pixel circuit comprising a plurality of 4-way shared pixels in a column of a pixel array, said method comprising:

applying a first logic signal on a column line to turn on a reset transistor, the reset transistor, when turned on, causing a reset voltage to be applied on a shared storage region to which each pixel of the 4-way shared pixels is commonly electrically coupled;

applying a second logic signal on the column line to turn off the reset transistor, wherein the first and second logic signals are complimentary to each other;

applying a third logic signal pulse to a transistor connected to the column line to enable readout of signals applied by a source follower transistor to a sample and hold circuit via the column line, wherein the source follower transistor is directly connected to the column line and has a gate connected to the shared storage region;

reading out a pixel reset signal onto the column line from the source follower transistor while the third logic signal pulse is applied to the transistor connected to the column line;

transferring a pixel image signal to the shared storage area; and

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reading out the pixel image signal onto the column line from the source follower transistor while the third logic signal pulse is applied to the transistor connected to the column line.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the 4-way shared pixels are configured in respective sequential rows associated with the column line.

3. The method of claim 1, wherein the 4-way shared pixels in the column comprise a plurality of green pixels and a plurality of pixels of another color.

4. The method of claim 1, further comprising using a column pull up transistor to turn on and turn off the reset transistor connected to the column line.

5. The method of claim 1, wherein the first logic signal is a logic high signal, and the second logic signal is a logic low signal.

6. The method of claim 1, wherein said step of reading out the pixel reset signal further comprises:

applying a fourth logic pulse on a sample and hold reset signal control line to sample a reset signal on the column line.

7. The method of claim 6, wherein said step of reading out the pixel reset signal further comprises:

applying a fifth logic pulse on the sample and hold reset signal control line after the step of applying the fourth logic pulse.

8. The method of claim 6, wherein the fourth logic pulse is a logic high pulse.

9. The method of claim 6, wherein said step of reading out the pixel image signal further comprises:

applying a fifth logic pulse on a sample and hold image signal control line after applying the fourth logic pulse.

10. The method of claim 9, wherein the fifth logic pulse is a logic high pulse.

11. A method of reading from a pixel circuit comprising a plurality of at least four pixels in a column of a pixel array, each pixel including a photosensor and each pixel being commonly electrically coupled to a shared storage region, said method comprising:

turning on a reset transistor common to all of the plurality of at least four pixels by applying a first logic signal on

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a column line to which the gate of the reset transistor is coupled, causing a reset voltage to be applied on the shared storage region;

turning off the reset transistor by applying a second logic signal on the column line, wherein the first and second logic signals are complimentary to each other;

enabling the column line for readout by turning on a transistor connected to the column line to enable readout of signals applied by a source follower transistor to a sample and hold circuit via the column line, wherein the source follower transistor is directly connected to the column line and having a gate connected to the shared storage region;

reading out the reset voltage from the pixel circuit through the source follower transistor;

transferring a pixel image signal from a photosensor of the pixel circuit to the shared storage region; and

reading out a pixel image signal onto the column line from the source follower transistor.

12. The method of claim 11, wherein each pixel of the plurality of pixels is configured in respective sequential rows of the first column.

13. The method of claim 11, wherein the plurality of pixels in the first column comprise a plurality of green pixels and a plurality of pixels of another color.

14. The method of claim 11, further comprising using a column pull up transistor on the column line to turn on and turn off the reset transistor connected to the column line.

15. The method of claim 11, further comprising using a sample and hold circuitry to sample and hold the reset voltage from the pixel circuit.

16. The method of claim 15, further comprising, after the reset voltage is read from the pixel circuit, transferring accumulated charge from a photosensor to the shared storage region.

17. The method of claim 16, further comprising using a sample and hold circuitry to sample and hold the accumulated charge from the photosensor.

* * * * *

UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE
CERTIFICATE OF CORRECTION

PATENT NO. : 9,210,347 B2
APPLICATION NO. : 13/733676
DATED : December 8, 2015
INVENTOR(S) : Zhiping Yin, Xiaofeng Fang and Xiangli Li

Page 1 of 1

It is certified that error appears in the above-identified patent and that said Letters Patent is hereby corrected as shown below:

Claims

In column 10, line 12, in claim 11, delete “having has a” and insert -- has a --, therefor.

Signed and Sealed this
Twenty-sixth Day of April, 2016

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michelle K. Lee". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent.

Michelle K. Lee
Director of the United States Patent and Trademark Office